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A CHRISTIAN CORNER
IN THE
ROMAN FORUM

(S. Sylvester in Lacu - S. Maria Antiqua)

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

BY

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A
CHRISTIAN CORNER
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ROMAN FORUM

The connection of the Roman Forum with the growth and extension of Latin Christianity has more than once attracted the careful attention of historians and archaeologists. Even popular interest was lately aroused on this subject by the admirable pamphlet of Abbé L. Duchesne: "Le Forum Chrétien. „ But so much light has been thrown upon it by the new excavations that it is unnecessary to apologize for an addition to that valuable treatise. It is moreover desirable to set before the English reader as soon as possible the results of recent study, substituting serious and reliable information to the irresponsible statements of the professional *cicerone*. We shall therefore strive to briefly describe what was evidently at some time a Christian Corner in the Roman Forum.

Once more has this historic centre of Republican and Imperial Rome been probed in the interest of science and its long kept secrets laid bare by the careful excavations under the direction of Commendator Boni, who well deserves the praise and gratitude bestowed upon him by all interested in the study of Roman antiquities.

It would lead us too far from our subject to point out all the recent discoveries; but as we wend our way from the present entrance to the Forum at the Vicus Tuscus round the ruined temple of Castor and Pollux and past the few remaining traces of the circular Aedes Vestae, we are confronted with new monuments almost at every step. The whole area with the exception of the high-standing columns seems to have lost its familiar features, and we are forced to smile at the thought of learned visitors who for years have been perfectly satisfied with false solutions of problems which were very far from being finally settled.

The general impression also that excavation only implies manual labour in the removing of earth, or debris, from the surface of buried remains, appears grossly ignorant as we are reminded of the patient and selfsacrificing efforts which we have witnessed here in the rigid application of modern and scientific

methods. For objects apparently useless have been constantly collected and classified with the minutest care: strata upon strata were thus examined; fragments of brick, stone, marble, bone, glass and terracotta were distinguished and labeled according to the depth of their strata, measured accurately inch by inch; and whenever special attention seemed desirable the earth itself was washed and sifted, sometimes with most satisfactory results. Comm. Boni's lecture on the Strata of the Roman Forum will long be remembered by the students who had the privilege of attending it. Photography naturally was also in constant requisition, and the most detailed observations have been duly registered, invaluable evidence for future study.

But the *Lacus Juturnae* claims our attention; the graceful *Puteal* and its more ancient shrine lie beyond it, and then enclosed by massive walls of imperial times comes the Christian Corner which is today the special object of our quest.

Here to the N. W. of what is generally called the Roman Forum stood, until the recent excavations were commenced, a small church dedicated to Santa Maria Liberatrice, with its annexed convent and garden. This cult title was but an Italian abbreviation of the

Latin: *Sta. Maria libera nos a poenis inferni*, (Holy Mary, deliver us from the torments of hell), a title held by this church in the Middle ages, and only abbreviated during the xivth Century into: *Sta. Maria de Inferno*. It is natural to connect with this title that of a church mentioned in the *Descriptio Urbis Romae* (xiith Cent.) viz: the Church of St. Anthony *near the place called Infernus*, a phrase repeated in the *Graphia Aurea* (xiiith Cent.) and applied to the Church of St. Antoninus *juxta quam est locus qui dicitur infernus*. We must also mention that Prof. Lanciani first connected this Church of Santa M. Liberatrice with that of Sancta Maria Antiqua, twice mentioned in the *Itinerarium Einsidlense* (viiith Century); but which others, following an ancient tradition, identified up till now with Santa Maria Nova on the other side of the Forum. The legends of Pope Sylvester tell how he conquered and chained a dragon in the place called *Infernus*, *by the temple of Vesta*, dedicating a chapel there to the Virgin in honour of his victory. These legends are however of a late date and of no value as historical evidence: it is only the connection of *Infernus* with the Temple of Vesta, and the possible relation of the dragon chained by Pope Sylvester to the serpents before which the Vestal Virgins offered cakes and wine in one of their

ancient rites (*quinquennas epulas*), that may suggest the origin of a Church dedicated to St. Mary on this spot. For in the rough half pagan thought of the vith Century this anti-thesis between Vesta and the Virgin might well appear. Mary was then triumphant over both Athene and Cybele; Vesta therefore might also be called upon to pay her homage, and the serpents which in that primitive cultus had received both food and drink be identified with the old Serpent which the new Great Mother had been destined in her Seed to crush.

One other Christian dedication is connected with this vicinity: *St. Sylvester in Lacu*. The *Lacus*, dedicated to the Nymph Juturna has just been discovered here, close by. It was celebrated in Ancient Rome as the sacred spring where the Twin Gods, Castor and Pollux, appeared immediately after the battle of Lake Regillus (B. C. 496). Here they dismounted and watered their snowwhite steeds; here they announced the glorious news of Roman victory, and then immediately they disappeared. But the *lacus* remained throughout the centuries a sacred relic, a glorious symbol, and probably also a potent charm, linked by the legend to the battle of the *Lake*. And with it recent excavations have laid bare that significant *catena* which so often marks the growth of human religions.

The ancient well of Juturna, crowned by the elegant *puteal* of *M. Barbatius Pollio Aed. Cur.* (A. D. 41) and its dedication *Juturnai Sacrum*, takes us back to that *domestic cultus* of prehistoric Rome, in which both fire and water, hearth and gate were all sacred, although neither Vesta nor Janus had yet taken to themselves the form of graven images. The *lacus*, on the other hand, represents the early *historical cultus* with its wealth of legends, heroes and relics which is so frequent at some period in the growth of great nations. It is itself a monument, — a square basin some twenty feet across with a pedestal in the midst of its clear spring waters, upon which stood a marble group of the Gemini and their horses, interesting fragments of which have been found on the spot during the course of these excavations. And finally, within a few feet of the *Lacus Juturnae*, so near as to make their connection most evident, there stand those three noble columns of the *temple* of Castor and Pollux, a silent yet eloquent witness to the grand old sanctuary and the gorgeous ritual which at a later time enveloped both primitive simplicity and historical legend, and which on account of its organization, its outward splendor and civil power may be immediately recognized as the religion of priests and emperors, *pontifical religion*.

And it is this last stage of religious development that we must expect to find as we enter our Christian Corner of the Roman Forum; for it was only when the *Ecclesia domestica* and the struggle of primitive centuries had been forgotten, when heroworship and tradition had been exalted, when instead of fierce persecution the Church had gained the power and favour of Imperial Rome, that Latin Christianity could thus invade the sacred precincts of the Forum and boast her triumphs over the ancient divinities within a stone's throw from the Aedes Vestae and in the very vestibule of a Caesar or in the Augusteum.

The existence on this spot of an ancient Christian church has long been familiar to archaeologists. In the days of Clement XI (A. D. 1702) a stone cutter in search of marbles discovered the ancient apse which was covered with frescoes and whose description perfectly agrees with what has lately returned to view.

The large representation of the Crucifixion, much more perfect than it is at present, and the apse frescoes with the figure of Paul I whose square nimbus was recognized as evidence of their being painted in the second half of the VIIIth Century, created even then much interest among the learned and were

visited by Pope Clement himself who would gladly have continued the excavations had they not entailed serious danger to the Church and convent above. The earth was therefore filled in, and no further approach to this ancient basilica is recorded until A. D. 1885 when during the excavations conducted in the neighbouring building which Prof. Lanciani regards as the ruins of the Augusteum, there appeared on the walls of an arched passage connecting these ruins a series of fresco figures representing: Blasius, Basil. . . ., Laurence, Christophanus and Benedict. These were examined by the celebrated Commendator G. B. De Rossi, whose loss must be a cause of constant regret in the study of our Christian Corner. He ascribed them to the xith Century and thought them painted under Greek influence to adorn a side chapel of the great basilica which still lay buried under the buildings and garden of Santa Maria Liberatrice. Only now has it been opened to our study and admiration, rescued at last from the darkness of centuries, when the lamented master whose veteran eye might best have read its history and revealed its art is no longer present to guide our steps as we stand upon its threshold before the ruined arch! We gladly acknowledge on the other hand our indebtedness to Prof. Marucchi whose valuable stu-

dies have just been published in the *Nuovo Bollettino di Archeologia Cristiana*, and confess that though we cannot always subscribe to his most original conclusions we are glad to check the accuracy of our notes and to correct some of our first impressions by the results of his study, and this in the interests of our readers to whom the value of our information must be rather in its accuracy than in its originality. We shall therefore acknowledge all the details reproduced from the *Bollettino* if only by the initials of that much esteemed author, thus abbreviated: (O. M.).

But before we enter the ancient basilica let us turn for a moment to the left where stands the ruin of a small chapel, one of the latest discoveries in our Corner. Its apse, broad and of only a slight depth is decorated with a fresco which was remarkably well preserved when first it was uncovered, but is at present almost ruined by exposure to damp. Apparently the martyrdom of the forty saints of Sebaste is its theme. These, it will be remembered, were condemned to be frozen, standing exposed in an icy pool until death might release them; while close at hand a warm bath stood open to any who would deny their faith and burn a few grains of incense in honour of a heathen divinity. The

legend adds that one indeed was proved unworthy of the martyr's crown; but upon entering the tempting warmth immediately expired, whereat one of the guards on duty round the pool immediately avowed himself a Christian and gladly took his place among those heroes in the deadly waters. And thus, their number undiminished, there were still forty found who endured the long agony and were for ever remembered in Greek martyrology by the name of οἱ ἅγιοι τεσσαράκοντα, *the holy forty*.

Our fresco paints these forty martyrs clothed only in waistcloths and standing in water which rises slightly above their knees. Their faces are resolute and even cheerful. The guards behind them are recognized by helmet, spear and round shield, and one of these is seated at the entrance of a dome-like edifice on the right, evidently the *tepidarium* into which a warm bath tempts the unfortunate apostate, who may be seen in the act of stepping out of the water by the aid of a four legged stool before the entrance to that building.

This picture is painted rapidly, almost in monochrome, and the drawing displays but small acquaintance with anatomy, the faces being almost exact repetitions of each other. Its date is doubtful. Marucchi ascribes it to the

ixth Century and thinks this chapel later than the basilica. But the lateral walls of this simple chapel were covered with frescoes of a very different style, and its relation to the great church might even suggest it to have been originally a baptistry outside S. Maria Antiqua. To some this fresco even appears a representation of the baptism of Constantine dating back to the vith Century, but as we have seen such an interpretation is at least unwarranted. To our left of the apse may be noted three ornamental crosses the second of which is well preserved. Richly jewelled and crowned they support the monogram Alpha and Omega which is suspended under both arms of the central cross and recalls the same letters hung separately from the arms of the viith Century cross in the Catacomb baptistry of S. Ponziano. There however we have probably a late reproduction of a much earlier fresco, its simple symbolism pointing to an almost primitive faith; here everything is decorative revealing an artificial taste. The central cross shows a medallion with a bust figure of Christ, His head surrounded by the cruciform nimbus. Turning towards this cross are two lambs, one on each side, and also two peacocks (of which one is still visible). Between the second and third crosses we also notice something hanging from above whic

reminds us of the *corona* or lamp in the frescoes under San Clemente.

It would appear that the three crosses were almost identical in form, and this threefold repetition, with the preeminence given to the second as we have seen in the attitude of both lambs and peacocks (believers on earth and in heaven) may suggest an early symbol of the Trinity, of Whom the Second Person is the central figure in the plan of redemption.

Some interesting *graphiti* may be traced in this chapel, generally the mementoes of priests who officiated here in past ages, or of pious pilgrims who thus recorded their visits to this sanctuary. To those familiar with De Rossi's *Roma Sotterranea* it will be easy to connect them with what has been discovered also in the celebrated chapels of the Catacombs.

We now leave this interesting chapel; but as we cast a last glance upon the great fresco of the Forty Martyrs and see them standing there in the frozen waters we remember the title of an ancient church, above referred to: St. Sylvester in *Lacu*, and we wonder whether at any time the beautiful legend of Sebaste was transferred by an ignorant and relichunting age to the *Lacus* we have seen close by in the Roman Forum, and whether that title may not have belonged to this small chapel

which has just returned to light in our Christian Corner.

We now enter through a broad archway the precincts of the great basilica whose title has at last ceased to be a subject of archaeological controversy, and whose important remains are probably to be compared in value to anything which has been discovered during the recent excavations in the Roman Forum. The ground plan of the building recalls that of the Greek Churches of Mt. Athos, of Sicily and of Southern Italy. First there opens before us the large quadrangle or *Atrium*; then comes the *Church* which is divided by two lines of columns into nave and side aisles; and lastly we shall find the *Sanctuary*, closed off from the laity by two transverse walls some four in height which join at the centre by means of a gateway. The fact that these low dividing walls were always covered in the East with painted images obtained for them the name of *Iconostasis*, and this screen (lat. *cancelli*?) gave rise to the modern term *chancel* which is applied to the entire space within. The side aisles also terminate in small chapels which communicate with the Sanctuary by means of lateral doorways.

Thus the absence of transepts is made evident and when we observe that the nave is

almost completely occupied by the Choir, or "schola cantorum," we cannot fail to remark how small is the space allotted to the laity, or public, in this mediaeval form of basilica. Evidently ecclesiasticism was at its height; the Church was the clergy, and the service a proud and magnificent ceremony.

The massive walls which enclose the basilica, as also its principal divisions are of concrete strengthened by rows of the *tegulae bipedales* and with a surface-facing only of triangular bricks. The relieving arches, very similar to those on the exterior of the Pantheon may therefore equally be described as mere ornament. Their construction by Hadrian or by Caligula is still a debated point. We are inclined with Professor Marucchi to attribute them to the latter, having carefully examined their manner of building; but if as it is alleged there is sufficient evidence for assigning a later date the question must shortly be placed beyond discussion, as was the case with the Pantheon which is now universally recognised as the work of Hadrian.

It is quite obvious however that a Christian Church was here introduced into the noble halls of pagan Rome, which had previously served the purposes of a temple or basilica, or of a vestibule to the imperial palace on the Palatine. Small traces of the original

architectural decorations have been preserved; but these together with the orientation of the building and the positive evidence of its methods of construction exclude all doubt from the above conclusion.

Originally these halls would doubtless be covered by huge barrel vaults, and the great stone pier in the atrium would seem to have been erected at a late date to support the vault above when this stood in danger of falling. Restorations in fact appear to have been frequent and probably at one period of its history the basilica assumed the structural form common to many of the early Roman Churches: the side aisles being low as compared with the nave, and windows being introduced above them in the side walls of the central division. It would be interesting to trace the period of this change in the original structure of the building. Was the great vault already partly destroyed at the time, its enormous masses of concrete falling in upon the Christian edifice and thus necessitating its reconstruction and affording opportunity for the insertion of a lower and easier form of roof? And did not a further downfall, possibly during one of the great earthquakes recorded in mediaeval history, finally wreck the building and by its terrible consequences prevent any attempt to preserve one

of the ancient Churches of Rome? Such hypotheses seem to us more credible than the explanation given that owing to the damp and cold of its situation Pope Leo IV saw fit to remove its title to the new church he had constructed on the Via Sacra, S. M. Nova, today known as S. Francesca Romana.

To these problems we can of course offer no positive solution for the present; but as we marvelled at the huge blocks of concrete which had to be broken into small pieces before they could be removed during the recent excavations, and as we attempted to face the possibilities of a careful reconstruction, they seemed naturally to suggest themselves for enquiry, and it is possible that they may not be without interest to some of our readers.

Noteworthy peculiarities of this ancient basilica may be found upon careful examination.

There are numerous small niches decorated with frescoes and introduced into the main walls of the interior. *Loculi*, or places of burial, are also numerous in the walls and in some cases are connected with the niches above mentioned, so that one is forcibly reminded of the *arcosolia* in the Catacombs. They are also generally so small as only to contain the remains of young children, and in one case only some tiny relic. If we may

judge from those which are best preserved they appear simply to have been covered with a slab of marble or even a thin layer of cement which was then painted over, and in one of them an eggshell was found close to the skull of an infant, evidently an emblem of the resurrection.

Another peculiarity lies in the fact that the principal apse was created by cutting into the thickness of the end wall of the building, and this probably at a late date, as some of the frescoes just outside it seem to show, unless only an enlargement of it may have been thought desirable at that time.

The Church itself, outside the "Sanctuary,," is divided into a nave and side aisles by two columns and two pilasters on each side, placed opposite to each other. The columns are of gray granite, surmounted by beautiful capitals of white marble, and are of classic workmanship possibly belonging to the original building on this spot; but the smooth round shafts have at some time been plastered over and painted with figures of various saints in the same way as the walls, with a view to their consecration in the Christian basilica.

The pavement of the nave is of gray marble slabs; that of the side aisles is of herring bone brickwork (*opus spicatum*) under which are traces of the old lava mosaic (*opus tes-*

sillatum) covered with a thick stratum of *coccio pesto*; but in the Sanctuary there is a mosaic pavement, rich with rare marbles and interesting in characters.

The single marble *tesserae* in the central *opus tessillatum* here are about an inch square and the pavement may be compared to that in the Church of S. Giorgio in Velabro which belongs to the times of Pope Zacharias (A. D. 741). Specially interesting is the circular ring of white marble in the border which encloses a disc of red porphyry and is inscribed with the words: *Mattia Compse*, this being the name of the artist, or *marmorario*, who did this work.

On another slab close by we see a rough sketch of two footprints and the greek inscription *kosmeses*, which recalls the old pagan votive offering (still venerated as a sacred relic) connected with the legend of *Domine quo vadis*. We notice in passing the similarity in root-meaning between *compse*, *kosmeses* *Cosmedin* and the well known name *Cosmati*. This pavement is kept constantly covered at present so that we have not been able to discover any traces of the altar before the apse, but there seems to be no sign of the existence of a crypt under this level, which is practically the same as that of the side chapels and indeed of the

nave from which it is only raised by one low step at the *iconostasis*. As we shall see, the remains of two small square altars have come down to us, one in the side chapel on our left as we face the apse, the other being built against the lateral wall in the aisle upon the same side. Evidently the upright form of altar, and not that of a sarcophagus, was then in use in this basilica.

We will now briefly examine the interesting frescoes which have survived all the ravages of time and which form the principal decoration of the Christian Corner in the Roman Forum, covering its walls with scenes of Bible history or the figures of saints, bishops, and martyrs. And as these frescoes form almost a study in themselves and will be the object of special visits on the part of all who are interested either in their art or iconography, we think it useful to follow the same order in their description as above, and thus shall begin our examination from the ruined arch which forms the principal entrance to the Basilica.

Immediately on our left as we enter the Atrium, and in one of the small niches above referred to, we recognize the remaining names and figures of the Roman Martyrs, *Agnes*

and *Caecilia*. The figure of Agnes is, or rather was at the time of its first appearance, especially interesting on account of its similarity to that in the viith century mosaics of the basilica (S. Agnese) on the Via Nomentana. In both figures she is dressed as a Byzantine empress; her dress is loaded with jewels and a diadem, or *mitella*, is on her head.

The corresponding niche on the other side of the arch is decorated with three figures of saints whose names have disappeared; but here the loculus connected with the niche is most evident. Graphiti abound here; among others we read in Greek characters: *Leo* and *Petros*.

On the left wall of the Atrium is another niche painted with a large bearded bust of Abbacyrus, who suffered under Diocletian at Alexandria and whose name is also found in the side chapel to our right of the apse. He is here represented brush in hand, as if in the act of painting miniatures upon a scroll which is stretched across a peculiar frame, very much in the form of a small bedstead.

On the opposite wall of the Atrium however a much more important fresco awaits us. Here is a row of painted bishops with the Virgin and Child in their midst. The Mother, whose inscription reads: *Maria Regina* (O. M.), has her hands open and extended

downwards, a distinct departure from the *orante* position in the mosaics of S. Venanzio at the Lateran baptistry (viith Cent.), while the Child stands in front of her in the same attitude. Other inscriptions connected with figures in this fresco have been read by Prof. Marucchi, from right to left: 1) *Pope Hadrian* (772-795) Book in hand; his square nimbus would indicate the date of this painting; 2) Peter, who holds a Book and crown, in the act of presenting Hadrian to the Virgin; and 3) to our right of the Virgin, *St. Sylvester*, whose victory over the dragon connects him with our Christian Corner.

Still to the right are two female saints holding each a Book and a crown.

We confess however that neither the reading "Hadrian," or the interpretation of Peter are at all conclusive to our eyes.

Near to this fresco, on our left, appears another seated figure of the Virgin surrounded by angels. The absence of the Child may indicate a possible representation of the Annunciation. A book is in her left hand.

Within the Church, and on our left as we proceed to the Sanctuary, we find a most remarkable series of figures representing bishops, popes, and martyrs. It is divided into two groups by a central image of Christ, Who

alone in seated on a throne and, in the absence of any inscription, is easily recognized by the cruciform nimbus. Before His image we also notice the remains of the small square altar, above mentioned, its *sepolcrino* broken open for the removal of relics at the time when this Church was unconsecrated. We will briefly examine each of these figures according to their interest and state of preservation taking them in their logical order of preeminence, i. e. in their relation to the central throne.

Thus on the right hand of Christ (our left) we find:

1) *St. Clement* of Rome, who suffered under Trajan A. D. 100. His emblem, the anchor, is in his right hand; the sacred volume in his left. The dress is composed of tunic; pallium philosophicum; pallium sacrum, this last with a single cross at each end, such as was worn down to the end of the ixth Century; and sandals.

2) *St. Sylvester*, Bishop of Rome (A. D. 314-335) who wears the tunic, dalmatica, pænula or pianeta, pallium sacrum, and on his feet the *caligae* with crosses (compagi).

3) *St. Leo* the Great (440-461), dressed like Sylvester. He also holds the Book in his left.

4) (?) Prof. Marucchi suggests *St. Alexander*.

5) *St. Valentine*, presbyter and martyr. He was beheaded in Rome A. D. 268-270 and is dressed like Sylvester with the exception of the pallium sacrum.

7) *St. Euthymius* (O. M.).

9) *St. Sebastian* (O. M.).

10) *St. Gregory* (O. M.).

11) *St. George* of Cappadocia, martyred in A. D. 303. Dressed in chlamys and tunic.

As martyr he holds a cross and a crown.

Returning to the central figure of Christ we must notice the jewelled throne and footstool.

The expression of the face is hard and severe, while the right hand is raised in blessing according to the Greek manner, and the figure is draped in a dark pallium.

On His left we find, in contrast to the other group of Latin fathers, the representatives of the Greek Church:

1) *St. John Chrysostom*, Bishop of Constantinople (A. D. 344-407) and described in the Byzantine guide to painting as "first of the bishops. „ He is clothed in paenula, dalmatica, tunic, pallium orarium with several *pattées* crosses and wears uncrossed caligae on his feet. The absence of beard is noticeable. A book is in his left hand.

2) *St. Gregory*, Bishop of Nazianzum [?] (A. D. 375-379). Dressed the same as Chrysostom.

3) *St. Basil* of Caesarea, known as the Great. (A. D. 328-380). The dress is the same as above, but the crosses on the pallium orarium are rounded, a variation which as it occurs on every alternate figure in this group we must consider as of no importance. The Book is also present in the left hand.

4) *St. Peter*, Archbishop of Alexandria (A. D. 300). An unbearded face. The Book is in left hand.

5) *St. Cyril*, Patriarch of Alexandria (412-444) who bears no small share of the odium of the murder of the noble Hypatia. A bearded face. The dress identical with that of *St. Basil*.

6) *St. Epiphanius*, Bishop of Salamis or Constantia in Cyprus (died 403). This figure is dressed in tunic, pallium philosophicum and pallium sacrum. He holds a cross in his right, a Book in his left.

7) *St. Athanasius* of Alexandria (298-372). The face is bearded, the dress similar to that of *Sylvester* except for several crosses added upon the pallium.

8) *St. Nicholas*, Bishop of Myra (A. D. 326) with beard and dressed like *Athanasius*. Both hold the sacred volume in their left.

9) *St. Erasmus* (O. M.) dressed like *Basil*. Above this long row of figures there are fragments of two other bands of fresco paint-

ings, such as formerly surrounded both Church and Sanctuary. Prof. Marucchi has pointed out that while in the former are scenes from the Old Testament in the latter there are scenes from the Gospels.

The subjects still visible on this wall, reading from left to right, are: (1) in the upper band: *a*) the entrance of animals into Noah's ark; *b*) traces of the Deluge; (2) in the lower band *a*) Joseph relating his dreams to his bretheren *b*) Joseph drawn up from the well and sold to the Egyptians, whose camel is a very amusing attempt at animal painting; *c*) Joseph handed over to Potiphar and his escape from Potiphar's wife; *d*) Joseph conducted to the prison whose two inmates may be seen through the small window; (*e*) Joseph's prophecies concerning both butler and baker are accomplished, the former being represented cup in hand at Pharaoh's table, the latter as hanging from a tree. Much more interesting, however, are the small niches or shrines on the opposite side of the Church.

The smallest of them, let into one of the pilasters of the nave, contains an image of the Virgin and Child. The Mother is without nimbus, a reminiscence of the earliest Christian iconography which is unusual, but not rare, in Byzantine art. Her name and title appear also in two simple monograms: "*the*

Holy Mary „ and not the grander title of late centuries “*Mary, the Mother of God.* „ The face of the Virgin, whose head is covered with a dark veil, is rigid with eyes large and fixed; while her right hand with unnatural long fingers is pointing to the Child. Evidently the artist conformed in this figure to a fixed hieratic type; yet its simplicity and unpretending attitude, in strange contrast to the rich vestments of Agnes and Caecilia above described, savours strongly of primitive doctrine and catacomb influences. The head of the Child, much more pleasing than that of the Mother is surrounded by a cruciform nimbus, and in its greater freedom of design may compare with some figures which we find in another niche let into the lateral wall close by, on this same side of the basilica.

There three female figures are represented, each of them accompanied by a child. In the centre is the Virgin, on her right is *St. Anna* and on her left *St. Elizabeth*. The children are therefore Mary, Jesus, and John the Baptist; the figure of the Child Jesus being distinguished by a cruciform nimbus and by an oval aureole which surrounds his whole body, also by his being wrapt in swaddling cloths as in the 11th century mosaic of the Nativity at St. Luke's in Phocidia. It is the

figure of Mary, however, which again arrests our attention; for while all the other figures are free and attractive we find that the painter is in this one once more constrained and artificial, as if striving to preserve a traditional type.

This face is decidedly the most ugly, its drawing coarse and hard; we find here neither an ideal, nor a portrait, but what might best be described as a conventional sign in sacred art. In connection with St. Anna Prof. Marucchi points out that this image is the earliest evidence we have of her worship in the West, her popularity here dating back only to the eighth century when it was introduced from abroad.

Two more frescoes demand our attention before we enter the "Sanctuary," proper.

On the two pilasters which mark the limits of the nave next to the chancel we find to our left a representation of the Virgin in the scene of the Annunciation. This is an interesting example of the repetition of the same subject and indeed of the same picture upon another layer of plaster spread over the original painting whenever it was thought desirable to renew it. The frequent fidelity of such reproduction is here evidenced by the line of the staff in the angel's hand being identical with a fragment of the same, now

visible on the inner surface which also bears an inscription giving in Greek the salutation of the angel (Luke, I, 28). A careful observation of the various cases of renewed paintings in this basilica has convinced us that this was not only due to the deterioration of earlier pictures, many of them being in a state of remarkable preservation: we might even suggest that these paintings may represent the constant devotional exercise of artistic monks and that the renovations took place at much shorter intervals than would at first seem probable. The apse and Sanctuary were thus repeatedly decorated, three or four times in many places, and this during the relatively short period of a little more than three centuries according to the conclusions of Professor Marucchi, who ascribes the earliest frescoes to the vith Century and the latest to the ixth.

On the left of this Annunciation scene is a full figure of *St. Demetrius*, the great warrior saint, clad in the military cloak and tunic, and bearing a cross in his hands.

To our right, however, and on the corresponding pilaster to that just described in a fresco much more difficult of interpretation. The group is composed of seven figures; in the centre stands a tall majestic woman whose head is distinguished by the only nimbus in

this composition and who holds in her hand what appears to be a white stole of diminutive proportions and with a knotted fringe at the ends. Four men are represented in the background, while another kneeling or bending before her seems to be in the act of presenting a small child to the saint.

Two names only appear in the fresco; that of the principal figure is: "*St. Salomone*," and that of one of the male figures on her right: "*Eleazar*." The scene therefore appears to be connected with the history of the Maccabees, of whom Salomone was the mother and Eleazar the teacher, and the choice of this subject is supported by the "Guide for Painters," above referred to, which although only compiled in the XIIIth Century for use by the monks of Mt. Athos, evidently represents the artistic rules of a much earlier date.

We now pass on into the Sanctuary proper, turning our attention in the first place to the frescoes of the apse.

A full length figure of Christ of more than double natural size, His head encircled in the cruciform nimbus, His feet supported by the suggestum, confronts us. The expression on the bearded face is harsh as usual in Byzantine images; it is the idea of the Judge or

Ruler of the universe which such figures generally suggest. Yet His left hand holds the Gospel and His right is upheld in blessing. A *tetramorph*, or fantastic image of an angel with six wings and four heads (derived from the symbolic vision of Ezekiel) is visible on His left, and Pope Paul I is seen standing on his right. This last figure is peculiarly interesting as its square nimbus may be regarded as an indication of the period to which these frescoes and also many others in the Basilica undoubtedly belong. Its inscription: "*The most holy Lord Paul Roman Pontifex*," and the proud attitude of standing on the right hand of Christ are also significant.

We find a strong contrast to this in the insignificant figure of Pope Honorius groveling at the foot of Christ in the mosaics of St. Paul's *extra muros*, yet who can tell which expresses true humility, the apparent presumption of the one or the ludicrous proportions of the other?...

Prof. Marucchi in a suggestive note upon these decorations by Paul I finds in them a reference to his being one of the first popes who had achieved political independence, and points to the series of four representative popes, two on each side of the apse, which we shall shortly describe

On the front wall of the apse we find,

above, a representation of the Crucifixion. The remaining fragments of this fresco show a representation of the living Christ on the cross, his head erect and eyes open. Under His left arm are the traces of a feminine head, probably that of John, with a nimbus, which may suggest a corresponding figure of Mary on the other side of the cross.

Seraphim and cherubim hover above the Crucified, while to our right appear a crowd of angels and worshippers, dividing which is a long inscription of thirteen lines which Professor Marucchi has not only identified with biblical prophecies concerning the death of Our Lord, but reproduced. Beneath the group of worshippers, whose extraordinary colouring evokes a smile at the artist's fancy until we remember that it would have a very different effect in the original and dimly lighted basilica from what it has today in the glare of an open sky, a most interesting study awaits us in the fact that here four different strata of frescoes have been laid bare. Having been on the spot when they first emerged from the soil our opportunities of recognizing their historical order were most valuable. The most ancient, or innermost, appears only in traces of decorative red colouring. The next above it is a fresco of the Virgin and Child in pure byzantine art. Prof. Marucchi as-

cribes this to the vith century. The Mother in the costume of a *basilissa* is seated on a richly jewelled throne; the Child on her knees is in the attitude of blessing. The style of painting recalls the mosaics of Ravenna and represents the earliest painting of figures in this basilica. Yet the third stratum is not less remarkable; to it belong the beautiful faces of two angels turned towards each other and slightly bent downwards. This attitude and their distance apart may suggest a central and seated Madonna similar to that just described on our left of them (?). It is in this remarkable difference of centreing between the 2nd and 3rd strata that we see the probable proof of the apse having been either enlarged or introduced at the time of the latter restorations. The fourth stratum, and last in point of time, shows a representation of various saints. We can still read the title of one full length figure: *St. Gregory the Theologian*, i. e. of Nazianzum. To our left of the apse another such bears the name: *St. Augustine*, written vertically and with ivy-leaf interpunctuation, while on the adjoining lateral wall of the Sanctuary are a number of portrait busts in medallions, their legible titles being 1) *St. Paul*, 2) *St. Andrew*, 3) *St. John*, 5) *St. Bartholomew*. Such medallions appear of remarkably good workmanship, being

marked by strength of line and boldness of relief. Prof. Marucchi ascribes them to the VIIIth Century.

Above these busts are two small scenes from the New Testament, viz: the Epiphany and the Journey to Golgotha. Three names are legible: *Magi* (O. M.), *Joseph*, and *Cyrenian*.

On the opposite wall the corresponding medallions have almost disappeared; but two small paintings are easily recognized. In one David is seen standing with staff and sling over the prostrate form of Goliath; in the other the prophet *Isaiah* stands at the death-bed of king *Hezekiah* while the Latin inscription gives his words: *Dispone domum tuam quia morieris* (Set thine house in order for thou shalt surely die). The king, who wears a peculiar triangular patch on his back, is turning his face towards the prophet, while an attendant stands on the further side of the bed.

We now pass from the Sanctuary to the side Chapel on our left as we face the apse, where the latest discoveries will surprise us. It is dedicated to the Saints Quiricus and Julitta, whose legendary history is illustrated on its side walls. But what immediately strikes the eye of every visitor is the won-

derfully preserved fresco on the end wall, viz: the Crucifixion. Its style, rough drawing and heavy tints, remind us of modern decorative paintings in Italian villages and it seems difficult to believe that this fresco has probably been buried for a millennium.

The figure of Christ, — His head slightly bent on His right side and surrounded by the cruciform nimbus (with a tendency to a Latin cross form), His long arms stretched straight on the cross, — is clothed in the *colobium* or armless garment which extends downwards to His ankles. This purple vestment is marked with *clavi* or vertical stripes. Above the head is a tablet with the inscription: "*Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews.* „ We notice that as in all the earlier representations of the Crucifixion the feet are nailed separately to the cross; but here we observe the absence of the *suppedaneum* or supporting log under the feet. At the foot of the cross are painted three wedges such as would fix it in the small hillock on which it stands, and which is marked by peculiar dark lines, possibly, as Prof. Marucchi suggests, an allusion to the earthquake of Gospel story.

Above appear the darkened sun and crescent moon, also valuable indications of its antiquity. To our left of the cross stand *Longinus* and *Mary*, their names perfectly legi-

ble. The spear-head of the first has just pierced the side of Christ and blood and water are both painted as gushing forth from the wound. Longinus is clothed in a short military coat and tight legcoverings; his sword suspended from the right shoulder hangs at his left side while his rank is indicated by an ornamental embroidery in gold on the front of his coat and wristbands. The Virgin is draped in dark garments.

On the right of the cross are also two corresponding figures. The first, unnamed, is clothed in a short and simple red tunic, under which his bare legs are visible down to his socks and sandals (*ciocie*) which are very noticeable. His appearance is rather that of a slave than of a soldier. He carries a long rod at the end of which is a sponge. Evidently it has been dipped into the vinegar, a bucket being represented near the cross. The second figure still on the right bears the full inscription: *St. John the Evangelist*. (The cross is possibly in the form of a T).

This remarkable fresco is well deserving of special study, belonging as it does to the rare group of the earliest representations of a scene which was altogether unknown to primitive Christian art.

Underneath the shallow recess which encloses the above fresco we find a row of figures

with the Virgin and Child at the centre. The state of preservation however only allows us to identify the figures of Sts. *Quiricus* and *Julitta*, together with the extreme figures of *Pope Zacharias* on our left and *Theodotus* on our right. Fortunately these are to us the most important, their square nimbus (?) indicating the date of these decorations (741-752) and the inscriptions giving valuable evidence that this is no other than the basilica of Sta. Maria Antiqua. *Theodotus*, administrator and chief advocate of the Holy Mother of God and Ever Virgin Mary who is called the ancient (*qui appellatur antiqua*) is presenting to the Virgin a model of this church which he has either dedicated or perhaps only decorated in the exercise of his office. And here it may be well to put the question: Have we any grounds for holding that at the time of this *Theodotus*, who was contemporary with Pope *Zacharias*, this Basilica had earned for itself the title of *antiqua* by its long history; or may it not have derived such a title only from some one of the venerated *eikons* of which several remain to this day and which it was pretended represented the original and was therefore the most ancient portrait of the Virgin Mary? That such was during the eighth century the title of this basilica has very fortunately been placed beyond a doubt.

That such was its original title, should this only imply the end of the sixth century, seems to us even possible. But if an earlier origin is thought probable or even possible for this Christian Corner in the Roman Forum we are inclined to doubt both its original dedication to Mary, and her attribute *antiqua*. Rather should we regard it as probable that originally it was described in *Via Nova*, then *Santa Maria in via Nova*, and finally, owing to the introduction of one of those miraculous images which have often contributed so much to the wealth and influence of a convent church: *Sancta Maria antiqua*. The limits of a brief description do not allow more than a suggestion of such a kind. To students of this vicinity, however, the suggestion may prove of some interest.

We now leave this most interesting chapel and glance at the corresponding one on the other side of the Sanctuary. There also were at one time numerous frescoes. Unfortunately little remains of special value. In a niche-like recess we see a row of figures and read in their order from left to right the names: "Cosmas, Abbacyrus, Stephen, Procopius and Damian.," On the outside lateral wall we also recognize the name of St. Pantelemon. Unexpectedly we find also in the centre of

this chapel a well of late construction, which Prof. Marucchi regards as having been originally a baptistry (?).

We now return to the nave and will briefly consider a few architectural fragments brought to light in the course of these excavations. Traces of ornamental stucco work may be found in various parts of the Basilica. A part also of an ancient *ambone*, dating back to John VIII was recovered having been used as a paving slab just in front of the step into the Chancel. It bears a double inscription in Latin: *John the servant of St. Mary*, and in Greek: *Of John, the servant of the Mother of God*. The genitive case of the Greek expresses clearly the origin of the ambone to which it belongs, and of which traces in marble are also found in the right wall of the *schola cantorum*. A decorated marble slab which once stood as one of the vertical side arches of the ciborium betrays Greek influence in design and probably belongs to the ixth or the beginning of the xth Century. Fragments have been also found of narrow marble pilasters from the screens, or *transennae*. These are grooved at the sides and decorated on their facing with an elegant vine tracery, the leaves being alternated with bunches of grapes. Here we must notice the total absence throughout the

Basilica of the Constantinian monogram and indeed of almost every early Christian symbol. Vestments and crosses, bishops and martyrs, Virgins and Crucifixes, evidently absorbed the attention of artists and satisfied the taste of the rich and the clergy at the time when this venerable monument of pontifical Christianity was in its glory.

Many other details might be added to our description; interesting *graphiti*, many of them still legible in Greek and Latin abound; fragments of frescoes everywhere suggest more or less probable interpretations; minute decorative marbles will often repay the patient search of their inspectors, but already we have passed the limits which we had proposed for this description and now must close with the simple wish that as many as read these humble pages may find as great an interest in the study of this Christian Corner of the Roman Forum as that which prompted us not only to follow during many months the whole course of its excavations, but also to form a personal opinion of its history and religious art.



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